

INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the feasibility and suitability of designating El Camino Real de los Tejas (Royal Road to the Tejas¹) a national historic trail under the feasibility study provisions of the National Trails System Act (PL 90-543, 16 USC 1241 et seq.). The legislation authorizing this study (PL 103-145, El Camino Real para los Texas Study Act of 1993) resulted from work by specialists of different disciplines possessing a keen interest in the heritage of Mexico, Texas, and Louisiana (see appendix A). The act uses the term, *El Camino Real* to refer to the route.

The legislation authorizing this study is based on the following findings by Congress, as enumerated in PL 103-145.

- (1) El Camino Real para los Texas was the Spanish road established to connect a series of missions and posts extending from Monclova, Mexico, to the mission and later Presidio Nuestra de Pilar de los Adaes, which served as the Spanish capital of the province of Texas from 1722 to 1772;
- (2) El Camino Real, over time, comprised an approximately 1,000-mile long corridor of changing routes from Saltillo through Monclova and Guerrero, Coahuila, Mexico; San Antonio and Nacogdoches, Texas and then easterly to the vicinity of Los Adaes in present-day Louisiana; and constituted the only significant overland route from the Rio Grande to the Red River Valley during the Spanish Colonial Period;
- (3) the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth century rivalries among the European colonial powers of Spain, France, and England and after their independence, Mexico and the United States, for dominion over lands fronting the Gulf of Mexico were played out along the evolving travel routes across this immense area; and, as well, the future of several American Indian nations were tied to these larger forces and events;
- (4) El Camino Real and the subsequent San Antonio Road witnessed a competition that helped determine the United States southern and western boundaries; and
- (5) the San Antonio Road, like El Camino Real, was a series of routes established over the same corridor but was not necessarily the same as El Camino Real; and that from the 1830s, waves of American immigrants, many using the Natchez Trace, travelled west to Texas via the San Antonio Road, as did Native Americans attempting to relocate away from the pressures of European settlement.

1. *Tejas* refers to the Tejas Indians and the lands where they lived in what is now east Texas and northwestern Louisiana.

The term *El Camino Real de los Tejas* was first applied, in the early years of the 18th century, only to the route used by the Spanish to go from Coahuila to east Texas, the Pita Road and Upper Road of this study. The Spanish road system in Texas then evolved and expanded as other routes were opened. For the purposes of this study the term *El Camino Real de los Tejas* is used to describe the entire Camino Real system within the modern states of Texas and Louisiana, including Camino Pita, Upper Presidio Road, Lower Presidio Road, Camino de en Medio, Camino de Arriba, Lower Road, Upper Road, and the Old San Antonio Road. Where it can be accurately defined as a separate entity, the term *Old San Antonio Road* will be used for the route between Natchitoches and San Antonio.

The name of the trail used in this study, El Camino Real de los Tejas, is different from that used in the authorizing legislation. This name is used to correct the Spanish grammar and to reflect a more accurate historical name. The term “El Camino Real para los Texas” will be used only to refer to the legislation authorizing this study.

Public, scholarly, and state interest in El Camino Real in Louisiana and Texas was the basis for the legislation to study the feasibility of designating the route as a national historic trail. The sponsorship of and attendance at an international conference in 1992 at Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, Louisiana, demonstrated public, academic, and state of Louisiana interest in El Camino Real de los Tejas. The conference addressed identification, evaluation, and protection alternatives for resources related to historic trails.

In response to a 1989 resolution passed by the Texas legislature, the Texas Department of Highways and Public Transportation (now known as the Texas Department of Transportation, or TXDOT) began research to commemorate the significance of El Camino Real corridor and to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the route. The Texas legislature also authorized the creation of a nine-member Old San Antonio Road Preservation Commission and an advisory committee to provide support and advice for the project. The resulting report, *A Texas Legacy: The Old San Antonio Road and the Caminos Reales: A Tricentennial History: 1691–1991*, was based on extensive archival research and on-the-ground verification of remnant archeological and historical sites associated with the road corridor.

During the mid-1970s the “Gateway Project” was developed to identify, recognize, and honor the common heritage of Mexico and the United States and to strengthen the bonds of international friendship. The project included a joint archeological and ethnohistorical study of the 18th century mission and presidio complex of San Juan Bautista at Guerrero, Coahuila, Mexico. The study was conducted by the University of Texas at San Antonio and INAH Monumentos Coloniales in Mexico City. For more than 120 years, the San Juan Bautista complex was one of the key points along El Camino Real, serving as a rendezvous point for exploration, military campaigns, and frontier expansion into what is now the United States.

El Camino Real para los Texas Study Act authorizes the secretary of the interior to study the feasibility of designating the Texas and Louisiana portions of the route as a national historic trail. The act also includes the following specific provisions to be addressed in this study:

- ◆ examine the changing roads within the historic corridor
- ◆ examine the major connecting branch routes
- ◆ determine the individual or combined suitability and feasibility of routes for potential national historic trail designation
- ◆ consider the preservation heritage plan developed by TXDOT entitled *A Texas Legacy: The Old San Antonio Road and the Caminos Reales*, dated January, 1991
- ◆ make recommendations concerning the suitability and feasibility of establishing an international historical park where the trail crosses the United States-Mexico border at Maverick County, Texas, and Guerrero, Coahuila, Mexico
- ◆ consider alternative name designations for the trail

The legislation also specifies that the study shall be undertaken in consultation with the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development and the Texas Department of Transportation. El Camino Real de los Tejas extends from the U.S.-Mexico border south to Saltillo, where it connects with other roads to Mexico City; therefore, the legislation for this study also authorizes the secretary of the interior to work in cooperation with the Mexican government (including technical assistance) to determine the suitability and feasibility of

establishing an international historic route. The significance, history, and culture of the part of the route in the United States cannot be fully understood without consideration of the entire route, including the Mexican portions.

This feasibility study will be submitted to Congress. Any future federal involvement in El Camino Real as a national historic trail must be based on a specific congressional authorization.

NATIONAL TRAILS SYSTEM AND NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAILS

The national trails system was established by the National Trails System Act of 1968 “to provide for the ever-increasing outdoor recreation needs of an expanding population and to promote the preservation of, public access to, travel within, and enjoyment and appreciation of the open air, outdoor areas and historic resources of the Nation.”

In the national trails system are congressionally designated national scenic trails, national historic trails, and national recreation trails. National scenic trails are continuous protected scenic corridors for outdoor recreation, such as the Appalachian or Pacific Crest National Scenic Trails. Recreational use is intended to be continuous, allowing uninterrupted travel from end to end. National recreation trails offer a variety of opportunities for outdoor recreation in or reasonably accessible to urban areas. Such trails are established and maintained by others, with “national” designation conferred by the secretary of the interior. The National Trails System Act provides for a lead federal agency to administer each national scenic and national historic trail in perpetuity, in cooperation with a variety of partners, including other federal agencies, state and local agencies, American Indians, local communities, private landowners, and others.

The purpose of national historic trails is the identification and protection of the historic route and its historic remnants and artifacts for public use and enjoyment. National historic trails are extended trails that follow as closely as possible and practicable the original routes of travel that are historically significant. The designation of such trails or routes is to be continuous, but the established or developed trails are not necessarily continuous land areas; they may include portions or sections of land areas, land and water segments, or other specific sites. Together these qualifying entities form a chain or network of areas that may be included as components of a national historic trail. National historic trail authorization would require federal funds for the planning, development, research, and/or management of the trail and related trail activities. Some of the existing authorized national historic trails are the Santa Fe, Oregon, Pony Express, Mormon Pioneer, and Lewis and Clark trails (see the National Trails System map).

The National Trails System Act establishes additional criteria for a national historic trail. These criteria are listed and discussed in the next chapter under “Feasibility and Desirability” (p. 26). If Congress authorized a national historic trail, a management plan would have to be prepared to guide the preservation and public use of the trail, as well as education and partnership efforts. Existing trail segments already in federal ownership could become the initial components of the national trail. Other trail segments could be developed and protected through various means such as cooperative and certification agreements, easements, and actions by nonprofit organizations.

National trails are managed through cooperative partnerships among public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and landowners. The federal role is one of setting and maintaining standards, providing incentives like technical and limited financial assistance to partners, helping to ensure consistent preservation, education, and public use programs, and managing the use of the official trail logo for marking and other appropriate purposes.